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The contribution of religiosity to ideology: Empirical evidences from five continents

Gian Vittorio Caprara and Michele Vecchione  
Sapienza University of Rome

Shalom H. Schwartz  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the National Research University - Higher School of  
Economics

Harald Schoen  
University of Mannheim, Germany

Paul G. Bain  
School of Psychology and Counselling and Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI),  
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Jo Silvester  
City University London, United Kingdom

Jan Cieciuch  
University of Zurich (Switzerland) and Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw (Poland)

Vassilis Pavlopoulos  
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Gabriel Bianchi  
Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovak Republic

Hasan Kirmanoglu and Cem Baslevent  
Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

Catalin Mamali  
University of Wisconsin, Platteville, United States

Jorge Manzi  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Miyuki Katayama  
Toyo University, Japan

Tetyana Posnova  
Yuriy Fedkovich Chernivtsi national University, Ukraine

Carmen Tabernero  
University of Salamanca, Spain

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Claudio Torres  
University of Brasilia, Brazil

Markku Verkasalo  
Department of Psychology and Logopedics, University of Helsinki

Jan-Erik Lönnqvist  
Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Finland

Eva Vondráková  
Constantine the Philosopher University of Nitra, Slovak Republic

Maria Giovanna Caprara  
Universidad a Distancia de Madrid, Spain

## **Abstract**

The current study examines the extent to which religiosity account for ideological orientations in 16 countries from five continents (Australia, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Greece, Finland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and United States). Results showed that religiosity was consistently related to right and conservative ideologies in all countries, except Australia. This relation held across different religions, and did not vary across participant's demographic conditions (i.e., gender, age, income, and education). After controlling for basic personal values, the contribution of religiosity on ideology was still significant. However, the effect was substantial only in countries where religion has played a prominent role in the public sphere, like Spain, Poland, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Turkey. In the other countries, the unique contribution of religiosity was marginal or small.

## **Introduction**

Religion and politics have taken quite different routes in the transition to modernity and democracy through the gradual emancipation of political authority from religious legitimation (Witte, 2006). However, this transition did not carry the estrangement of religion from public affairs. Religion, indeed, continues to play a major role in several societies, although to different degrees and in different forms, across countries and generations (Casanova, 1994).

Research has shown that religiosity still represents a valid predictor of electoral behavior and political alignment in most Western democracies (Bruce, 2003; Dalton, 1990, 1996; Inglehart, 1997; Knutsen, 2004; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Van der Brug, Hobolt & De Vreese, 2009). A common finding is that religious individuals are more likely to hold conservative views on a wide range of policy issues and are therefore more inclined to vote for conservative or right-wing parties (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009; Duriez, Luyten, Snauwaert & Hutsebaut, 2002; Malka, Lelkes, Srivastava, Cohen & Miller, 2012). Most religions, indeed, still hold in great consideration values like authority and tradition, which are at the core of conservative platforms. In addition, most religions have difficulty in facing how liberal platforms handle sensitive issues like sex, marriage and abortion.

The relation between religiosity and political orientation appears to hold across cultural and political contexts. For example, using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), Piurko, Schwartz and Davidov (2011) found that religious individuals from different countries tend to locate themselves more on the right of the political spectrum than non-religious individuals. This association was stronger in countries with a major national religion, and where religious practices are still widespread, like Greece, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Spain, than in more secular countries, like Denmark and the United Kingdom.

The general picture one may draw from available records, however, is that of a fluid situation whose direction and end points are difficult to capture. Whereas secularization has pervasively expanded through northern and center European Protestant countries, in traditional

Catholic countries like Italy and Spain, and in the Orthodox Greece, the decline of church attendance has been less rapid and profound.

Since religious practice has generally declined among the youth, one can't predict the extent to which previous associations between religiosity and political orientation will continue to hold in the future. Among post-communist countries, one can't assess the health status of Polish Catholicism, where religion is still credited with responsibility for resisting and dismantling the communist authoritarian regime. The secularization of Israeli society has been counteracted by the growing influence of orthodox Jewish, whereas the secularization of Turkey has been relented by the new vitality of Islamism. A special reference needs to be made for the United States, where different religions make different offers that appeal for different forms of religiosity (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

The present contribution examines the extent to which religiosity accounts for ideological self-placement in 16 countries from 5 continents. It involves secondary analysis of data from a cross-national project on the role of values in orienting political preference. With respect to other, published manuscripts that used the same set of data (Caprara & Vecchione, 2015; Caprara et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2014; Vecchione et al., 2015), this is the only study that includes religiosity.

The study extends the literature by including countries such as Australia, Brazil, Chile, Japan, and Turkey, that were not considered in previous studies (Cohen et al., 2009; Duriez et al., 2002; Malka et al., 2012; Piurko et al., 2011). Moreover, the study is novel in addressing the distinctive influence that religiosity may exert on ideology after basic values were taken into account. Earlier studies have indeed shown systematic associations of value priorities with both religiosity (Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Saroglou, Delpierre & Dernelle, 2004) and political preferences (e.g., Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, Caprara & Vecchione, 2010). Specifically, meta-analytic evidence has shown that conservation values (e.g., conformity, tradition, and security), namely values which express order, self-restriction, and commitment to the customs and ideas of traditional culture, are positively related to religious commitment (Schwartz & Huismans, 1995).

This finding is consistent across countries with different economic, cultural, and religious characteristics (Fontaine, Luyten, & Corveleyn, 2000; Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Saroglou et al., 2004). Conservation values are also related to a preference for right-wing and conservative ideologies, across different cultural contexts and political systems (Aspelund, Lindeman, & Verkasalo, 2013; Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Caprara, Vecchione & Schwartz, 2012; Caprara et al., 2017; Piurko et al., 2011; Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan & Shrout, 2007). Thus, the observed link between religiosity and political ideology might depend, at least in part, on individual's value priorities. We aimed to disentangle unique and shared effects of religiosity on ideological self-placement.

In accordance with previous findings (e.g., Malka et al., 2012; Piurko et al., 2011), we hypothesized that religiosity would be associated with a preference for right-wing and conservative ideologies, due to the importance assigned by most religions to authority and traditional values, and in contrast with the emphasis of left-wing and liberal ideologies on individual's freedom of expression (Haidt, 2012). We also expected the association between religiosity and political ideology to be stronger in countries with an established religious majority, like Italy, Spain, Greece, Israel, and Poland. In such countries, the dominant religion has received special recognition from political authorities, and religious institutions have historically exerted considerable influence in shaping citizens' views of society and politics.

## **Material and methods**

### *Participants and Procedures*

This study involved 16 countries: Australia ( $N = 285$ ), Brazil ( $N = 995$ ), Chile ( $N = 415$ ), Finland ( $N = 428$ ), Germany ( $N = 1066$ ), Greece ( $N = 374$ ), Israel ( $N = 478$ ), Italy ( $N = 557$ ), Japan ( $N = 364$ ), Poland ( $N = 699$ ), Slovakia ( $N = 485$ ), Spain ( $N = 420$ ), Turkey ( $N = 512$ ), Ukraine ( $N = 735$ ), the United Kingdom ( $N = 469$ ), the United States ( $N = 543$ ). Overall, the sample comprised 8,825 individuals (53% female), with a mean age of 40.60 ( $SD = 14.74$ ). Details about sample composition in each country are reported in earlier studies (Caprara et al., 2017, Table 1; Schwartz

et al., 2014, Table 2). As described in Schwartz et al. (2014; see also Caprara et al., 2017), a representative sample was obtained in Germany and Turkey. In the other 14 countries, researchers enlisted university students to gather the data. Questionnaires were administered online in Australia and Finland and by telephone in Germany. In the other 14 countries, written self-reports were obtained. The same instructions were used for administering the instruments in all countries.

## Measures

*Ideology.* Ideology was measured through two indicators. The first was a self-placement item on the left-right scale: “In political matters, people sometimes talk about “the left” and “the right” How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?” Alternatives ranged from 1 (Left) to 10 (Right), without intermediate labels. The second was a self-placement item on the liberal-conservative scale: “In political matters, people sometimes talk about *conservatives* and *liberals*. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?”. Alternatives ranged from 1 (Extremely liberal) to 7 (Extremely conservative).

*Religiosity.* Participants rated their religiosity in response to the question "How religious, if at all, do you consider yourself to be?", using an eight-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all religious) to 7 (very religious). We adopted this uni-dimensional approach to assessing religiosity because it is most appropriate when studying heterogeneous groups from different countries with different religious affiliations (Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Schwartz & Huisman, 1995).

*Values.* The Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ, Schwartz, 2006) was used to measure ten domains of values, as operationalized in Schwartz's (1992) theory. The PVQ includes 40 short verbal portraits of different people matched to the respondents' gender, each describing a person's goals, aspirations, or wishes that point implicitly to the importance of a value. For each portrait, respondents indicate how similar the person is to themselves on a scale ranging from “not like me at all” to “very much like me.” Respondents' values were inferred from the implicit values of the people they consider similar to themselves. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha reliabilities, averaged across countries, ranged from .56 (Tradition) to .80 (Achievement). Details on the



psychometric characteristics properties of the PVQ scales in the present samples were reported in a previous study by Vecchione et al. (2015; see also Schwartz et al., 2014).

## Results

### *Preliminary data*

Table 1 (first column) reports the mean ratings of religiosity in each country. Since these results cannot be regarded as representative of the respective countries, we also reported the results of a worldwide survey conducted in 2009 (Table 1, second column). Respondents were asked whether religion is important in their daily life, and percentages for "yes" and "no" answers were reported (we downloaded the scores from <http://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>). Highest percentages were observed in Brazil, Turkey, Poland, Italy, and Greece. Lowest percentages were observed in Japan, UK, Finland, and Australia. Spearman rank-order correlation between percentage of 'yes' in this survey and mean ratings of religiosity observed in the present study across the 16 countries was .68 ( $p < .01$ ).

### *Religiosity and ideological self-placement*

Table 1 (third and fourth column) reports the correlations of religiosity with the left-right (L/R) and the liberal-conservative (L/C) scales. Results showed that religiosity was significantly associated with at least one indicator of ideological self-placement in all countries except Australia. The same pattern was observed in each country: More religious individuals located themselves more to the right and conservative side of the political spectrum than less religious individuals. This association was stronger in Israel ( $r = .46$  with L/R,  $.53$  with L/C), Spain ( $r = .46$  with L/R,  $.48$  with L/C), Greece ( $r = .45$  with L/R,  $.38$  with L/C), Poland ( $r = .42$  with L/R,  $.43$  with L/C), and Italy ( $r = .39$  with L/R,  $.45$  with L/C).

### *Religiosity and basic values*

Table 2 reports the pattern of correlations observed in each country between religiosity and the whole set of ten values. Results showed that individuals more committed to a religion attributed relatively high importance to the conservation values of security, tradition, conformity. Tradition

values, in particular, showed the highest positive correlation in most countries, with Pearson's  $r$  ranging from .20 (Japan) to .60 (Israel). Religiosity, by contrast, was associated with low importance attributed to hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction.

#### *The unique contribution of religiosity*

A multiple regression was used to assess the unique contribution of religiosity to ideological self-placement, controlling for basic values and demographic variables. In this analysis, we used the liberal-conservative scale as outcome in the U.K. and the U.S., and the left-right scale in all other countries, in accordance with the ideological labels that are most commonly used in each country.

We first controlled for demographic variables, entering gender, age, income, and education in the first step as a single block of predictors. We then entered the ten values in the second step, and religiosity at the third step.

The contribution of demographic variables at the first step was significant in 10 countries (first column of Table 3), accounting for a proportion of variance in those countries between .01 (Ukraine) and .08 (United States). Basic values made an incrementally significant contribution in all countries at the second step (second column, Table 3). The proportion of variance uniquely accounted for by values ranged between .04 (Slovakia, Ukraine) and .26 (Finland, Italy). In most countries, universalism and, to a lesser extent, self-direction values predicted a preference for left and liberal ideologies. Security and tradition values predicted a preference for right and conservative ideologies.<sup>1</sup> In the third step, religiosity accounted for significant additional variance in all countries, except for Australia (third column, Table 3). A substantial increment in R-squared was observed in Spain, Poland, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Turkey. In these countries, religiosity added from 6 to 11% of explained variance, after basic values were taken into account. In the other

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<sup>1</sup> Details on the association between values and ideological self-placement are reported in Caprara et al. (2017). Authors used the same set of data but focused on values and ideology, without considering religiosity.

countries, the unique contribution of religiosity was marginal or small (i.e., from 1 to 4% of explained variance).

We linked cross-national variations in the strength of the relation between religiosity and ideology to the importance assigned to religion in each country, operationalized as the percentage of inhabitants who affirm that religion is an important part of their daily lives. We found an overall tendency for this relation to be stronger in countries where religion is more important [Spearman rank-order correlation between the increment in R-squared reported in the last column of Table 3 and the percentage of citizens affirming that religion is important (Table 1, second column) was .45,  $p < .10$ ].

### **Moderation analysis**

We investigated whether the relation of religiosity with ideological self-placement is moderated by gender, age, and income. To this aim, a moderated regression analysis was performed in each of the examined countries. In this analysis, religiosity and the demographics were entered in the first step. Three interaction terms, representing the cross-product of religiosity with gender, age, and income were entered in the second step. All predictors were centered around their means prior to computing the interaction terms. Results showed no significant moderating effects. We can therefore conclude that the contribution of religiosity to ideological self-placement did not vary across participant's demographic conditions.

### **Discussion**

Religion is a potent psychological and social force. History attests to the power of religion in supplying the worldview that is needed to cope with life and death for ordinary people, and the moral legitimacy to claim obedience for their rulers. Recent literature documents the associations of religion with subjective health and well-being (Diener, Tay & Myers, 2011; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Reed & Neville, 2014). Likewise, a vast literature points to the contribution that religiosity still exerts on the functioning of communities and society by fostering moral and

prosocial behaviour, by strengthening individual compliance with group norms and by promoting civic engagement (see Galen, 2012, for a critical review).

The aim of the present study was to examine the pattern of relations between religiosity and ideological self-placement across 16 countries that differ significantly in the nature, history, and role of religion. As expected, religiosity was associated with right-wing and conservative ideologies in the vast majority of examined countries, despite the diversities of political offerings and of the dominant religion. This association was consistent across predominantly Roman Catholic (e.g. Italy, Poland, Spain), orthodox (Greece), protestant (U.K., Finland), Jewish (Israel) and Islamic (Turkey) populations. It is also worthy of note that age, gender, education, and income did not exert any moderating effect on the association between religiosity and political preference, further attesting the robustness and generality of this result. As stated earlier, we believe that the association between religiosity and ideology is due to the importance given by different religions to traditional values about authority, family, life and sex in shaping people's world views, and thus in dictating their choices in the public sphere (Haidt, 2012).

There were, however, important differences across countries in the strength of this relationship. Specifically, the association was stronger in countries like Greece, Italy, Israel, Poland, and Spain, where the majority religion had significantly influenced the moral education and socialization of children and the national identity of people. This occurred despite the different role religion might have played to sustain or to contrast the political regimes in power. In Spain, for example, religion has been a strong supporter of an authoritarian regime for over three decades during Franco's dictatorship. In Poland, religion has played a significant role in building the national identity and in fostering the transition towards democracy after the demise of real socialism.

Whereas the effect that religiosity exert on ideological self-placement tend to be stronger in countries where religion is more important, many other relevant, contextual variables may contribute to explain the variability observed across countries. For example, religiosity is likely to

exert a major influence on political preference to the extent that it reflects deeply held values about life and the government of society that accord or conflict with contingent political offerings.

This study also examined how religiosity relates to basic personal values. In accordance with earlier studies (e.g., Fontaine et al., 2000; Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Saroglou et al., 2004), a consistent relationship was found between religiosity and value priorities, placing religion among the major allies of conservation. Specifically, religious people tended to assign high priority to self-restraining values, which encourage preserving traditions, avoiding uncertainty, and submitting to others' expectations (tradition, security, conformity), and low priority to values emphasizing independence in thought and action, receptiveness to change, and gratification of the senses (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism).

Most importantly for our purposes, we found that religiosity exhibits incremental validity for predicting ideology over basic values in most of the traditionally religious countries. In such countries, the impact of religion may have been strengthened and prolonged by socialization experiences in family and the school, which predispose to worldviews and moral values conducive to political ideologies that are most congenial to the dominant religion. In this regard one should keep in mind the special influence that religious authorities and hierarchies have exerted in people's life within and beyond the religious domain. It is a topic for further investigation to examine the extent to which religiosity predisposes towards authority and hierarchy through beliefs and practices that are more congenial to a right ideology, or whether both religiosity and right-wing ideology rest upon common predispositions to obey authorities and trust into hierarchies.

The unique contribution of religiosity to ideology, by contrast, was weaker in several secular countries (e.g., Australia, Finland, Japan, U.K.), where modernization has led to a significant decline of religious practice, where political institutions have long been independent of religious authority, and where moral education in schools is not committed to a special faith. In these countries, the choices people make in politics mostly reflect the values they cherish.

Our data do not allow us to disentangle the reciprocal influences between values and religiosity. Clarifying the extent to which religions influence people's value priorities versus the extent to which people's personal values influence their commitment to the religion they profess is a topic worthy of in-depth study. Likewise, the extent to which basic traits, needs and attitudes are associated to religiosity and ideology, and moderate their relationship, is worth of further investigation. Extending the study to broader samples representative of various constituencies of population is a further goal to be achieved by future studies.

A potential limitation of the study is the use of a single-item to assess religiosity. Although this approach has been extensively applied in cross-cultural investigations of religiosity (Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995), it may fail to capture the complex ways in which religion and politics are related (Malka, 2013). The fact that most results are based on samples of convenience represent a further limitation of this study, that warns against the premature generalization of its findings. Yet, above findings converge in pointing to the current importance of religion in people's political views. Although the practice of religion in church attendance and religious marriages has diminished in most Western countries, one should not underestimate the influence that religiosity may still exert in orienting citizens' political choices. Religious institutions, in fact, may still play an important role in established democracies either directly through their explicit or implicit support for certain parties or indirectly through emphasizing values that suggest giving priority and preference to particular political issues and platforms.

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Table 1. Importance of religiosity and correlations with ideological self-placement.

	Importance of religion		Correlations with ideological self-placement	
	Mean rating of religiousness (present study) <sup>1</sup>	Is religion important? Percentage for 'yes' (2009 Gallup survey) <sup>2</sup>	Left-right	Liberal-conservative
Australia	2.44 (SD= 1.90)	32%	.06	.01
Brazil	3.91 (SD= 2.02)	87%	.21**	.27**
Chile	3.53 (SD= 1.96)	70%	.24**	.33**
Finland	2.63 (SD= 2.23)	28%	.30**	.29**
Germany	3.13 (SD= 2.14)	40%	.23**	.20**
Greece	3.56 (SD= 1.88)	71%	.45**	.38**
Israel	2.09 (SD= 2.18)	51%	.46**	.53**
Italy	3.22 (SD= 2.14)	72%	.39**	.45**
Japan	1.71 (SD= 1.92)	24%	.20**	.02
Poland	3.60 (SD= 1.75)	75%	.42**	.43**
Slovakia	3.56 (SD= 2.11)	47%	.25**	.34**
Spain	2.86 (SD= 2.09)	49%	.46**	.48**
Turkey	4.17 (SD= 1.66)	82%	.34**	.38**
Ukraine	4.02 (SD= 1.61)	46%	.15*	.05
UK	2.95 (SD= 1.98)	27%	.26**	.31**
US	3.02 (SD= 1.90)	69%	.25**	.28**

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ . <sup>1</sup> "How religious, if at all, do you consider yourself to be?" (from 0 = not at all religious, to 7= very religious). <sup>2</sup> "Is religion important in your daily life?" ("yes" or "no").

Table 2. Correlations of basic values with religiosity.

	SE	CO	TR	BE	UN	SD	ST	HE	AC	PO
Australia	.03	.12	.41**	-.03	-.07	-.17*	-.19*	-.17*	-.05	.08
Brazil	.11**	.16**	.44**	.09*	-.07	-.20**	-.20**	-.25**	-.08	-.06
Chile	.15**	.22**	.46**	.12	-.05	-.31**	-.20**	-.29**	-.10	-.14*
Finland	.22**	.17**	.41**	.03	.00	-.21**	-.15**	-.31**	-.18**	-.08
Germany	.04	.08*	.48**	.14**	.03	-.15**	-.22**	-.23**	-.12**	-.04
Greece	.44**	.19**	.56**	-.12	-.23**	-.34**	-.28**	-.26**	-.12	-.06
Israel	.09	.14**	.60**	.03	-.14**	-.18**	-.17**	.21**	.13**	.14**
Italy	.21**	.22**	.44**	.03	-.08	-.27**	-.23**	-.24**	-.09	-.09
Japan	.13*	.07	.20**	.01	-.01	-.10	-.03	-.04	-.13*	-.06
Poland	.15**	.24**	.44**	.15**	.13**	-.15**	-.19**	-.29**	-.29**	-.28**
Slovakia	.03	.27**	.52**	.18**	.05	-.21**	-.26**	-.27**	-.25**	-.14**
Spain	.19**	.31**	.46**	-.02	-.23**	-.31**	-.15**	-.24**	-.09	.02
Turkey	.21**	.23**	.42**	.12*	.03	-.31**	-.19**	-.19**	-.15**	-.17**
Ukraine	.04	.01	.29**	.12**	.12**	-.14**	-.09	-.17**	-.09	-.13**
U.K.	.15**	.19**	.56**	.07	-.10	-.25**	-.21**	-.34**	-.10	-.07
U.S.	.17**	.23**	.34**	.08	.10	-.17**	-.19**	-.25**	-.20**	-.19**

*Notes.* \* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ ; SE= Security; CO= Conformity; TR= Tradition; BE= Benevolence; UN= Universalism; SD= Self-direction; ST= Stimulation; HE= Hedonism; AC= Achievement; PO= Power. Before calculating correlation coefficients, persons' responses were centered on their own mean rating of the 40 PVQ items.

Table 3. The unique contribution of religiosity to ideology, controlling for basic values and demographic variables.

	Step 1:		Step 2:		Step 3:	
	Demographics		Basic values		Religiosity	
	F (df)	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔF (df)	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	ΔF (df)	ΔR <sup>2</sup>
Australia	1.73 (4, 232)	.03	6.82 (10, 222)**	.23	1.37 (1, 221)	.00
Brazil	.50 (4, 878)	.00	16.84 (10, 868)**	.16	13.12 (1, 867)**	.01
Chile	7.23 (4, 387)**	.07	5.97 (10, 377)**	.13	7.65 (1, 376)*	.02
Finland	6.52 (4, 424)**	.06	16.12 (10, 414)**	.26	19.84 (1, 413)**	.03
Germany	8.14 (4, 938)**	.03	16.71 (10, 928)**	.15	14.70 (1, 927)**	.01
Greece	3.67 (4, 350)**	.04	11.94 (10, 340)**	.25	39.96 (1, 339)**	.08
Israel	7.67 (4, 439)**	.07	15.35 (10, 429)**	.25	23.73 (1, 428)**	.04
Italy	2.25 (4, 496)	.02	17.18 (10, 486)**	.26	60.61 (1, 485)**	.08
Japan	.47 (4, 290)	.01	3.36 (10, 280)**	.11	6.03 (1, 279)*	.02
Poland	2.06 (4, 666)	.01	7.51 (10, 656)**	.10	88.01 (1, 655)**	.11
Slovakia	1.65 (4, 448)	.01	1.87 (10, 438)*	.04	37.20 (1, 437)**	.07
Spain	3.36 (4, 352)**	.04	8.00 (10, 342)**	.18	58.29 (1, 341)**	.11
Turkey	6.07 (4, 464)**	.05	4.28 (10, 454)**	.08	30.82 (1, 453)**	.06
Ukraine	2.67 (4, 733)*	.01	3.28 (10, 723)**	.04	15,60 (1, 722)**	.02
U.K.	5.42 (4, 391)**	.05	11.18 (10, 381)**	.22	5.89 (1, 380)*	.01
U.S.	9.10 (4, 433)**	.08	7.19 (10, 423)**	.13	16.19 (1, 422)**	.03

*Note.* The outcome variable in the regression analyses is the liberal-conservative scale in the U.K. and in the U.S., and the left-right scale in all other countries.

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